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ABSTRACT

The most efficient and pragmatic conceptual system of viewing theatre work is through a communication model. This model is opposed to two other general conceptions of theatre and drama. The first is based on the notion that drama makes aesthetic demands and has requirements of its own that the artist must meet, even though it has no existence except in the thoughts and behavior of human beings, while the second view promotes only the artist's financial, educational, or therapeutic profit and leaves out audience awareness as a key factor. The communication model is a functional approach in which each moment of the play is seen to be not only purposeful in itself but also contributing to a grand purpose and to be manipulating the experience of the audience as precisely as possible toward predetermined ends. It is possible to make plays that are believable but meaningless, in which the moments convince but do not knit together into a coherent structure of significant behavior. The generation and manipulation of significance is the factor that separates artist-created behavior from the general run of behavior in "real life." Directors or designers who fully understand the functional approach have the basic tool that allows them to move out of the realm of inspiration and chance and into the realm of craft. (AEA)

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"Theatre and Drama as Communication"

Before we try to answer the question of the day, we had better examine it very carefully. It's a dangerous one...the kind theatre people have traditionally stumbled over. It's crucial for us to acknowledge, from the start, that there is no true answer to the question "what is theatre?" We simply cannot say what theatre is in any true, durable sense. Theatre is whatever you and I make of it today. If our discussion is to yield anything of value, we must cast off the meaningless metaphysical question and translate our issue instead into these practical terms: "given our goals, what is the most useful way for us to think of theatre and drama?" In other words, the issue is conceptualization.

Lest anyone dismiss the matter of conceptualization with "it's just a matter of semantics; who cares?", I want to remind you that conceptualization is far from trivial: it is not merely academic gamesmanship to argue about our conceptual structures. It may be true that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, but we're talking about something much more complex and subjective than sensory experience. Our goal is to organize our thought processes as efficiently and productively as possible. In such a pursuit, conceptualization is central. Our concepts control the focus of our attention. They mediate and, in the process, distort all of our perceptions. They function much like photographic filters, enhancing one aspect but supressing others. Our concepts call to mind the questions through which we confront our experience and these questions determine what we notice, which, of course, determines the data base from which we draw the evidence which directs our choices, our system of inference, and our standards of evidence.

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It does matter how we talk to ourselves about our work. The best mind may be blinded by an inadequate conceptual system. Haven't we all experienced that moment of illumination, that shock of recognition, when we realized that there was a better way of "looking at" some part of our life. The psychologists call this a moment of conceptual reorganization and most of our important growth comes through such restructuring. I will argue today that many of us are the victims of inadequate conceptual schemes and that this limits our artistic work unnecessarily.

I believe that the most efficient beginning we can make in our theatre work is to see it all as communication. This fundamental choice will condition all of our later choices.

In proposing that we use a Communication model for our work, I'm arguing against the exclusive use of several other possibilities which I'll lump together under two loaded labels. First, "Art for Art's Sake". The varieties of this model are all based on the mistaken notion that Theatre and Drama, in themselves, make some sort of aesthetic demand on us, have requirements of their own, which the artist must meet. This seems to me to be patently untrue, though it is the traditional view. Drama and Theatre have no existence except in the thoughts and behavior of human beings. Whatever demands or purposes or requirements there may be are the demands or purposes of these individuals, not of Theatre and Drama. Ask the "Art for Art's Sake" theatre person how he makes his decisions in preparing a play; you'll get a vague answer, I guarantee, burdened with loose, meaningless terms, citing either tradition or a personal intuition of the "nature" of art or of this work of art, but nothing tangible and arguable, nothing which can be pinned down. At the root of this approach I find either of two attitudes. Often it is a fear of aesthetic responsibility which deludes us into acceptance of the notion

that there are rules, guaranteed ways of making art, which we can learn once and forever trust. More often it is the desire to avoid accountability for our choices. We claim a privileged, somewhat mystical, relationship between the artist and his art which must remain forever inviolate and unexamined. The unquestioned intuition is the source of all decision. It is right because it feels right. Insecure artists have successfully peddled this notion for centuries. It has hurt our art greatly in its denial that the process can be understood and learned. It veils our work under the cloak of inspiration. But above all, I reject this approach because it gives us nothing to go on. It may protect our egos, but it doesn't help us improve our work, and that is our primary goal.

A very popular approach in our time might be called "Art for the Artist's Sake." Its battle cry is "process, not product" and its code word is "intra-personal". Certainly it is legitimate for an artist to be concerned with his own profit, whether it be financial, educational, or therapeutic, and no doubt all these factors need to be in our minds as we pursue our work, but as a <u>basis</u> for our work this attitude is inadequate because it is incomplete, leaving out the audience which must be a key factor in the equation, no matter what our interests in theatre are, because without the audience, there is no theatre. The intra-personal aspect must not be neglected, but neither should it be mistaken for the formative principle of our work. An atmosphere and way-of-working which rewards the artists is a highly desirable <u>condition</u> of theatre work, not its governing purpose. It is simply not true that if we get the process right (i.e. if everyone involved in producing the play experiences growth) the product will take care of itself. Nothing takes care of itself. We must see to everything. And when we come back to the question I see as basic, that is "how do we make our decisions?", we find that "Art for the Artist's Sake" does not lead us to an answer. The intra-personal factors are secondary because they are individual and occasional

factors. The common factor which can knit together all our disparate interests and purposes is the notion of a transaction, a communicative transaction, between artists and audience. This umbrella allows us to systematically deal with the concerns of everyone involved.

My reason for preferring the communication model, however, is not simply the flaws I find in the other approaches. What moves me is the pragmatic value of the communication model. To put it simply, when (as a director) I conceive my work in the theatre to be the manipulation of time/space/bodies/etc. for the purpose of communicating specific content, moment by moment, to the audience, I find that all aspects of the work go better. I am not obliged to rely exclusively on intuition (which, though valuable and necessary, is notoriously unreliable) or on tradition (which too often means only clichés). The model encourages me to deal with my work in terms of practical communication problems (thousands of them) rather than with the too-broad, too-vague problems of "making it interesting" or "making it beautiful." We all work with the basic question "what must happen now?", but I don't think we're likely to find consistent, reliable answers to that question unless we pose it to ourselves in a very specific way, in terms that can be dealt with systematically and rationally and on a scale small enough to make each problem reasonably understandable and solvable. I think the best way of applying the question is to ask of each perceivable moment in the play "what is the audience to see, to feel, to realize at this moment, and how can each element of production be made to contribute to this specific communication." In other words, I'm advocating a Functional approach in which each moment of the play is seen to be purposeful and all purposes are seen to be contributors to the grand purpose which is to manipulate the experience of the audience as precisely as possible toward predetermined ends. The director's and designer's basic concern, then, is to learn why each moment of the script exists in this form and to trans-

late that purpose from the literary mode to the mode of moving, speaking bodies, objects, light. (I hope, by the way, that the idea of manipulation has no negative connotations for you. It is the purposes of manipulation which we ought to judge as good or bad. We're engaged in manipulation of one kind or another through most of our lives. The manipulation of art, we may hope, is generally benign, but that, of course, is up to each artist.)

Perhaps your response to my advocacy of the communication model is to find it obvious and not very important. Does it seem to you that this must be something we're all doing already? I assure you it isn't so. I've traveled alot and seen many shows (too many, I think) at all levels of skill. Again and again I see plays in which the crucial sense of "the grand strategy" (which we expect in any work of art) is missing, in which choices seem to have been made almost randomly, in which the moments, good or bad, add up to nothing. I've struggled to find the source of these failures, and all the paths I've followed lead me back to the simple conclusion that this awareness of the grand strategy of the play and the way in which each moment contributes to that strategy is not likely to emerge unless we adopt the communication model. It is the only model I know of which builds the fundamental problem of comprehending the grand strategy into our way of thinking about playmaking. Nothing in the Stanislavskyesque approach through character purposes leads us to these crucial questions; nothing in our concern for spontaneous creativity and personal growth in the actor leads us to them. The evidence is overwhelming that we are likely to miss these crucial issues unless we build them into our very image of theatre and drama. (Once again, let me say that I don't reject these other approaches; I'm just convinced that they can't be the foundation stone of our work. They are valuable, but inadequate.)

I teach graduate courses in directing. I see students at all levels of "talent" make their fledgling flights as directors. Those least prepared make

their blocking decisions on this basis: "keep it moving." They know only that something must happen, but they have no basis for deciding exactly what needs to happen. Usually, they don't even understand that need enters into it. They are busy trying to find something for the actor to do; lacking a productive model of the process, they don't know where to look for a justification of their decisions.

At the next higher level of skill, they usually latch onto the important idea that characters should have a psychology and that their thoughts should "cause" them to move. This approach leads to something which looks alot more like life, but it still isn't adequate. It is quite possible to have a show in which each moment is convincingly "real" and still miss the grand strategy completely. It is possible, in fact common, to make plays which are believable but meaningless, in which the moments convince but do not knit together into a coherent structure of significant behavior. And significance is the hallmark of behavior in the arts; the generation and manipulation of significance is the factor which separates artist-created behavior from the general run of behavior in "real life." Significance, of course, is what communication is all about.

The great moment of creative growth for these young directors comes when they grasp the idea that, though believability (i.e. psychological authenticity) is a necessary condition for a successful play, the heart of the matter, the decisive factor, is the control of significance. These directors, relying on the communication model, now have a complex but controllable approach to their work. Not a formula, but a trustworthy way of going about their problem-solving. They speak in two languages: to their actors, they speak of character motives, actions, and sub-text because they understand that this is what lights the actor's creative fires. To themselves, as they block the show and guide the actors, they speak functionally, they ask (thousands of times) what all must be communicated here if

this moment is to play its part in the overall economy of the play. And they go beyond this to ask what each moment might do to clarify and reinforce the thousands of perceptions which the audience must accumulate and organize if it is to understand the whole.

The director or designer who fully understands this Functional approach has the basic tool which allows him to move out of the realm of inspiration and chance and into the realm of craft. He knows what questions to ask and that, my friends, is the biggest step toward finding some trustworthy answers.

Finally, let me return, for a moment, to the general issue of conceptualization. Although I've argued today as though I were against the ideas proposed by my colleagues, in fact, I'm merely arguing that we consider carefully exactly what each of these ways of looking at our trade can do for us. At some moments, I find the intra-personal concerns to be of great importance. At other moments, I can't do without my Stanislavsky or my Transactional Analysis. Etcetera. Our concepts, our models, are tools, and, as with the carpenter's tool box, the key question is "do I have all the tools I need and do I know when and how to use each of them?" My argument here is that we must enlarge our conceptual repertoire; we must be sure that our models direct our attention to all of the important aspects of our work; we must be sure we know which model illuminates which aspects of the job. It seems to me that the communication model is the comprehensive one, because it can deal with all facets of playmaking. It does not compete with the many other useful models; it includes them.